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Reagan Defends Nica

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President Reagan yesterday described anti-government guerrillas in Nicaragua as "freedom fighters," and said action by Congress to cut off U.S. financial support for them would set "a very dangerous precedent" because "it literally was taking away the ability of the executive branch to carry out its constitutional responsibilities."

Reagan made his remarks during a rambling and sometimes confusing 35-minute Oval Office interview with reporters from six news organizations. A transcript of the interview was made available to other White House correspondents. He took issue with Tuesday's vote by the Democratic majority of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence to cut off covert U.S. aid to the guerrillas fighting the left-wing Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

Acknowledging that the United States was directly aiding and "providing subsistence" to the anti-Sandinista forces, Reagan expressed support for their objectives and said he hoped that what he called an "irresponsible" House committee vote would be overturned in the Senate.

During the interview, Reagan sometimes interrupted himself and strayed from the subject as he sought to explain administration policy on Central America, arms control and the Middle East. Without indicating he knew he was doing so, Reagan also contradicted the position of the State Department in discussing the policy on nuclear arms adopted Tuesday by the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops.

Some of the reporters who participated in the interview said afterwards that the president at times appeared to have difficulty concentrating on the questions and his answers to them.

Questioning the legitimacy of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, Reagan said: "And what really—other than being in

control of the capitol, you might say, and having a handle on all the levers—what makes them any more a legitimate government than the people of Nicaragua who are asking for a chance to vote for the kind of government they want."

Reagan said it was right to refer to the anti-Sandinista forces as "freedom fighters" while the leftist, anti-government rebels in neighboring El Salvador should be described as "guerrillas." But he became confused at one point and called the leftist forces "the freedom fighters in El Salvador."

The administration's major argument for giving covert financial aid to the anti-Sandinista guerrillas has been that the U.S. assistance is confined to trying to halt shipments of arms and supplies to the leftists in El Salvador and is in no way directed at the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government.

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The president discussed this provision as if the proposal permitted continued but open financial support of the anti-Sandinista guerrillas through these countries, which the bill does not do.

Asked if he would funnel the aid to the U.S.-supported guerrillas through other countries, Reagan responded: "No. I was saying that's what the committee said, that the committee said we would have to go over it, and then, in going over it, you can only give money to another government. And if you did that, then you would have to be depending on—well, maybe those other governments in Central America would give that money to the freedom fighters in Nicaragua."

"Now, if they want to tell us that we can give money and do the same things we've been doing—money, giving, providing subsistence and so forth to these people directly and making it overt instead of covert—that's all right with me. I just don't want the restrictions put on it that they might put on."

This was the most direct statement yet by an American official of the role that the United States is playing in aiding the anti-Sandinista forces.

When Reagan was asked in a follow-up question whether he would be willing to accept the idea of overt aid to the anti-Sandinista guerrillas, he replied: "Yes, but not if they do it as one individual or more than one has suggested on the Hill—that they would do it and, then, we would have to enforce restrictions on the freedom fighters as to what tactics they could use."

"And I have said that if we were to do that, then I would expect that the only fair thing would be that the Nicaraguan government would itself impose the same restrictions on the freedom fighters in El Salvador, only I don't call them freedom fighters because they've got freedom and they're fighting for something else. They're fighting for a restraint on freedom."

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